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The Old Swan, 14 King's Head St Harwich, Essex



Harwich Architectural Survey: Paint Report

June 2020

The Old Swan, 14 King's Head St, Harwich, Essex

Paint Report (Harwich Architectural Survey Project)

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1: INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

This short report describes two separate paintings in two different rooms in The Old Swan, 14 King's Head St which are chronologically and stylistically distinct. These notes are based on rapid surveys of buildings in Harwich pre 1611 as part of the Harwich Architectural Survey.

2: DESCRIPTION

2.1: Ground floor painting

This painting is located on an infill panel and lintel above a blocked doorway in the southeast ground floor crosswing, ground floor room (see location images and plates 1, 2).

This painting consists of a figure seated on a stool with his legs overlapping onto the lintel and an inscription. Various suggestions have been made for the subject and the inscription.

Historic England describe the painting and inscription as:

The plaster over has late C15 wall painting of a seated male figure with horn and taper and inscription:- 'Sor I ssegn ande mak my mon, the sschryn ys here the bodys goon'. To the left, a curious oval feature with black bands alternatively interpreted as gaming board or cannon.¹

Alternative interpretations have suggested that the ovular shape at the left of the panel might also be a bale of yarn; another is a barrel. One interpretation is that the text is a 'lament for an empty cellar'.²

This is an unusual subject and there may have been a printed source. We do not know whether this was one part of an extensive scheme that covered all the wall surfaces. There might have been other scenes, or this might have been the only figurative element significantly located above the door, to be viewed and 'read' by anyone passing through the door.

Dating is not straightforward. It is suggested that this painting might be late C15th/c.1500. Comments from Susan North, costume specialist at the V&A Museum suggest a later date. There seems to be a composite use of costume details:

From the waist up, the sleeve resembles the styles of the late 15th century. The chin-length hair and cap styles are typically male of the late 15th and early 16th century. However, below the waist he appears to be wearing the voluminous trunk hose of the late 16th century.³

Costume can be a problematic dating tool. For example, if an older design source is used for the painting then the costume may simply be old fashioned. It can only provide, at best, a *terminus post quem*. While some of the costume elements will work for an earlier date, the trunk hose suggest a late C16th.

¹ Historic England Listing description no. 1281210, The Old Swan House, Harwich. One version of the text suggests 'so as I worry and moan, the spirit is here and the body is flown', Harwich and Manningtree Gazette, 8th June 2016

² pers comm.. Richard Oxborrow

³ Susan North, email communication 10th April 2018

2.2: First floor painting

The other painting is located in the first floor front room of the northwest crosswing (see location images).

The head: Remains of a painted scheme survive on the rafters of the original roof, consisting of a head, possibly haloed (?) with foliage and floral motifs (plates 8, 10, 11). There are remains on both sides of the roof and it is likely that these fragments were part of a more extensive scheme. The most obvious feature is the head with a ?diadem and remnants of ?rays around the head similar to the rayed halos seen on the C15th rood screen at Barton Turf, Norfolk (plate 16), C15th glass also at Barton Turf, Norfolk (plate 17) and wall paintings at 132 Piccotts End Cottage, Hemel Hempstead, 1527 (plates 14 & 18). There is too little visible to be certain but this may be a religious subject, acceptable pre-Reformation.

Foliage: Another distinctive fragment is the foliage (plate 13). Again there is too little for certainty but given the context this is possibly early C16th, perhaps c.1530s. Numerous ornament prints produced in the late C15th by German artists such as Schongauer illustrate scrolling acanthus (some examples are shown in Figs 1 & 2) and variants can be seen in a wide range of media across northern, central and eastern Europe (eg Saxon Churches in Romania). There are a number of wall painting schemes in England that incorporate this type of ornament, such as 132 Piccotts End, Hemel Hempstead (plates 14, 15) and the Flushing Inn, Rye, Sussex (plate 12). The listing description suggests mid C16th for this crosswing but survey work with Brenda and Elphin Watkin suggests a possible earlier date. If so, the painting may be contemporary with the construction of the crosswing and is a smartly decorated chamber.



Fig. 1: Flower, ornament, c.1465-1500, van Meckenem after Schongauer (*British Museum*, 1925.0406.89)



Fig. 2: Schongauer, 1475-85, Horizontal ornament with hop vine (*V&A Collections*, 18956)





Plate 1

Above: view of the ground floor room, southeast crosswing, location of the wall painting. Note also the decorative plaster.

Plate 2

*Right: Location of the wall painting above a blocked door
(All photos © A Kirkham 2019)*





Plate 3

Above: view of the painting



Plate 4

Top right: detail of the stool

Plate 5

*Right: top right corner, detail of the text
(All photos © A Kirkham 2019)*



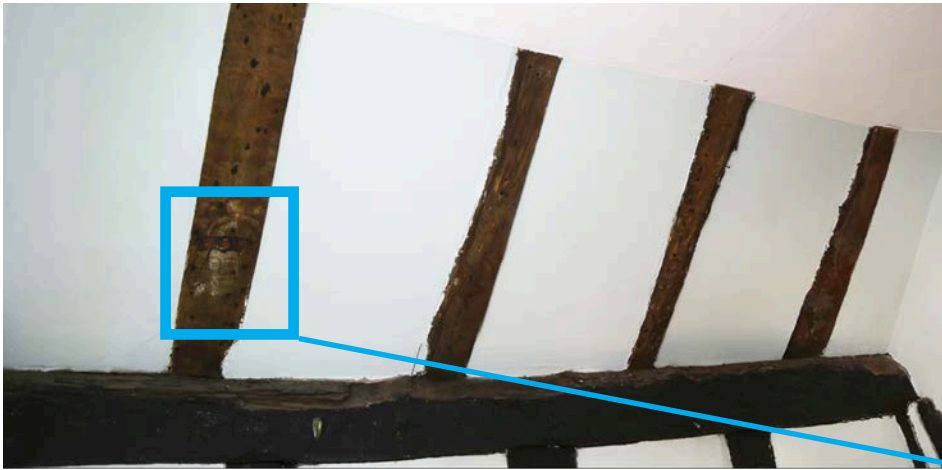


Plate 6

Above: north west crosswing, front first floor room, remains of a painted scheme on the rafters

Plate 7

Right: view of the rafter with the most distinctive feature, a head

Plate 8

*Far right: detail of the head
(All photos © A Kirkham 2019)*



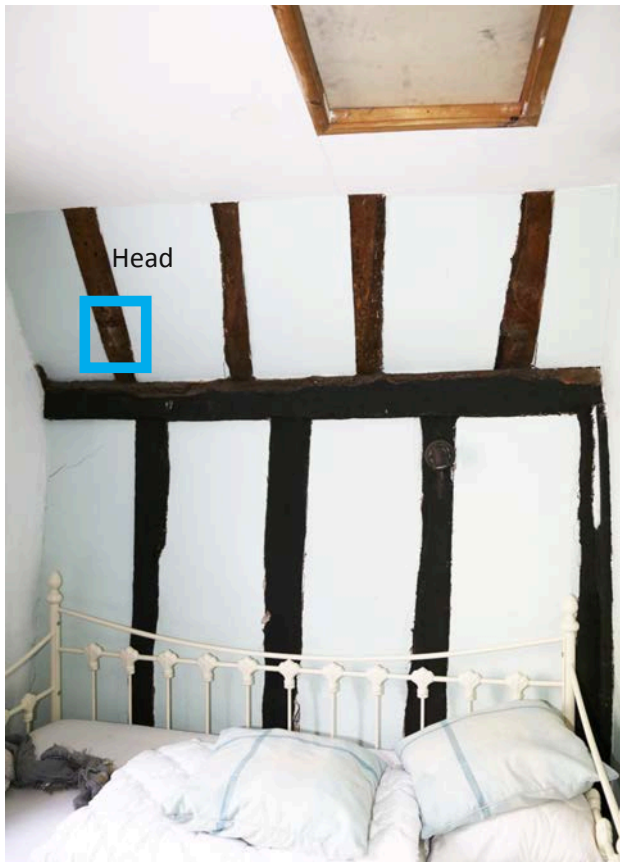


Plate 9

Above: view of the wall timbers and rafters

Plate 10

Right: detail of foliage

Plate 11

Far right: detail of a floral motif
(All photos © A Kirkham 2019)





Plate 12

Left: Drawing by F W Reader, The Flushing Inn, Rye, Sussex (Image © V&A Collections, E.5301-1958)

Plate 13

Bottom left: detail from The Old Swan, first floor chamber

Plate 14

Below middle: detail of Christ in Majesty, in the hall, 132 Piccotts End, Hemel Hempstead, Herts, not before 1527 (Photo © A Kirkham 2016)

Plate 15

Bottom right: detail of foliage from the same scheme in plate 14 (Photo © A Kirkham 2016)

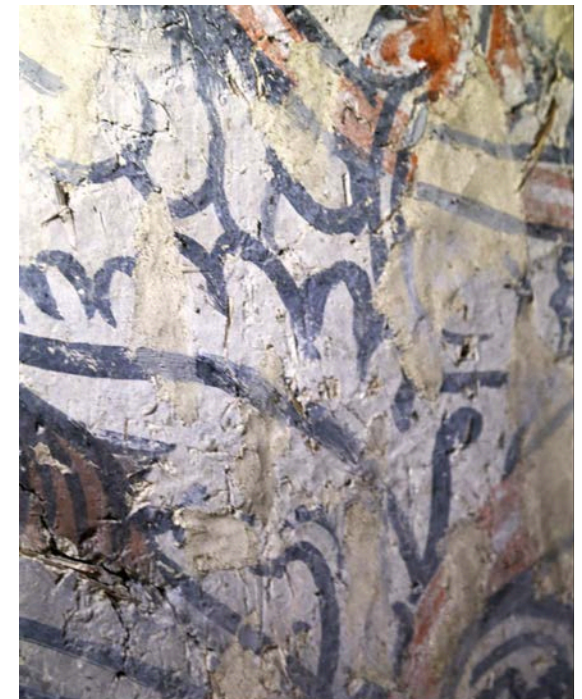




Plate 16

Above: detail of an angel, rood screen, Barton Turf, Norfolk C15th
(Alamy Image ID: C7T0X9, accessed 10 June 2020)



Plate 17

Top middle: Late C15th glass, Barton Turf Church, Norfolk
(<http://www.norfolkchurches.co.uk/bartonturf/bartonturf.htm>, accessed 10 June 2020)

Plate 18

Right: detail of St Catherine, 132 Piccotts End, Hemel Hempstead (Photo © A Kirkham 2016)



Plate 19

Far right: detail of the head from a rafter at The Old Swan, Harwich

